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TAGS: PGOV PREL KPKO KDEM CG UG
SUBJECT: ITURI'S MILITIAS: WHY THEY CONTINUE TO FIGHT

Classified By: PolOff CBrown, reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶11. (C) Summary: Ituri District's security has long been threatened by the presence of local armed militias backed by Congolese and Ugandan elements seeking to profit from the region's abundant natural resources, instability, and lack of central government authority. Over the past three years, a series of joint MONUC-FARDC military operations, along with significant demobilization efforts and the arrest of several militia leaders, has slowly reduced the overall threat these militias pose. The current Ituri militias -- an estimated 2,000 fighters -- are however the hard-core remnants of the former groups. Consequently, the Ituri militias have become more difficult to eliminate, requiring more comprehensive economic, political, and security solutions. End summary.

ORIGINS OF ITURI MILITIAS

¶12. (C) The DRC's northeastern Ituri District faces security challenges resulting from its geographic location, ethnic composition, and wealth of natural resources. The instability in this region has often been separate and apart from the larger threats and waves of violence which have swept through the eastern part of the country. At the base of the original conflicts were tensions between indigenous Hema and Lendu ethnic groups, which fought one another for control of land for agricultural or pastoral use. Subsequent clashes between Hema and Lendu continued throughout the wars which engulfed the rest of the DRC beginning in the late 1990s. However, as Ituri shares a 200-mile land border with Uganda -- in addition to 90 miles of shoreline along Lake Albert -- outside interest in the District and neglect by Kinshasa left it vulnerable to manipulation by its neighbors.

¶13. (C) In late 2002 and early 2003, Ituri saw the creation of a host of militia groups backed by individuals in Uganda and Rwanda. These militias -- including the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), the Front for National Integration (FNI), the Patriotic Force of Resistance in Ituri (FRPI), and the People's Armed Forces of Congo (FAPC), among others -- were founded predominantly along existing ethnic lines. As central government authority in Ituri was almost non-existent during this period, these militias effectively controlled the region politically, economically and militarily. One of their goals was to gain control of the region's abundant natural resources, including gold and wood. The militias fought to control land, particularly the gold mining region of central Ituri, and to prevent rival ethnic groups from achieving economic dominance. Militia groups engaged in extensive illegal cross-border trade in exchange for money, or more often, weapons. The lack of central government controls in

Ituri provided an ideal environment for the groups to operate and thrive.

SLOWLY REGAINING CONTROL

14. (C) At its peak, the conflict involved some 25,000 militia throughout Ituri, which descended by mid-2003 into a complete state of lawlessness. The French-led Operation Artemis that year ultimately established a tenuous beachhead in Bunia that allowed MONUC to resume operations there. As MONUC deployed several thousand peacekeepers to the region, and the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) dispatched tens of thousands of its own troops, joint operations slowly eroded the militias' overall control of Ituri. While neither MONUC nor FARDC officials can quantify how many militia members have been killed, the estimated number of those remaining in Ituri in mid-2006 is approximately 2,000. MONUC officials and others in Ituri report that those militias still operating -- primarily the FNI and FRPI -- are concentrated in specific areas; namely, the Nioka-Fataki axis north of Bunia, and the Tcheli-Semiliki axis south of Bunia.

15. (C) Three other factors, aside from military operations, have contributed to the decrease in militia numbers. First, approximately 9,000 ex-combatants have been demobilized and reintegrated back into their communities. While the demobilization programs in Ituri have faced significant financial and logistical problems, they have nonetheless provided an opportunity for thousands to turn in their arms. In addition, government authorities have captured several high-ranking militia leaders over the years, including Thomas Lubanga of the UPC and Chief Kahwa Mandro of PUSIC. While

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removing these militia commanders from the field has not resulted in the dissolution or disappearance of the militias themselves, the arrests have had a chilling effect. Members of Mahagi's civil society told PolOff on a recent visit that the handing over of Lubanga to the International Criminal Court in The Hague was viewed with alarm among militia supporters -- an indication that militia leaders may no longer be able to evade justice.

16. (C) A third important factor in addressing the militia threat in Ituri was the creation of an interim administration by the GDRC to govern the District as a semi-autonomous region. Led by District Commissioner Petronille Vaweka, the interim administration has been able to establish some measure of control and provide limited services to the population. Vaweka herself became a central force in successful efforts to demobilize and disarm militias by virtue of the authority of her office, as well as her own tireless efforts to negotiate peace settlements. But lacking full support and virtually any funding from Kinshasa, Vaweka and the administration did not -- and still do not -- have the resources to impose governmental control and to build economic infrastructure.

REDUCED NUMBERS, BUT PERHAPS MORE DANGEROUS

17. (C) Despite their reduced numbers, militias in Ituri still pose a significant threat to security and stability. The May 28 capture of seven MONUC peacekeepers from Nepal illustrates the capability these groups possess and the resulting danger they can cause, even to forces that are better-equipped. During a May 6-10 visit to Ituri District, PolOff spoke with a variety of local politicians, civic leaders and MONUC officials, all of whom said the militias are still a constant concern. Former MONUC Head of Office Sharouh Sharif reported that captured or killed militia members have regularly been found with significant weapons caches, including grenade launchers, mortars and other light arms. The administrator of

Mahagi territory, Jean-Paul Likambo, said the area around Nioka is effectively ungovernable because of the presence of the FNI militia led by Peter Karim. Likambo said the militia there often sets up road blocks and levies illegal taxes from local merchants and traders. In Djugu and Irumu territories, MONUC humanitarian officials report that thousands have been forced to flee their homes due to the threat from militias. (Note: The IDP problem in Ituri is made worse because local populations will often leave an area in advance of expected military operations against the militias. End note.)

Independent Electoral Commission (CEI) officials in Bunia and Mahagi said their operations were often hampered because they are not able to access areas controlled by the militias, and therefore are unable to deliver voting equipment or conduct civic education campaigns.

WHY THEY FIGHT: THE ECONOMIC ANGLE

¶8. (C) Militias continue their fight in Ituri largely to retain control of Ituri's resource wealth. Any remaining pretense that Ituri's militias had been engaged in an ethnic conflict dissolved in 2005 with the creation of the umbrella organization called the Congolese Revolutionary Movement (MRC), which sought to bring together Ituri's various militias. The focus of militia activities has shifted towards a common enemy, as militias now battle MONUC and the FARDC rather than each other in order to protect their economic interests. Ituri District Commissioner Vaweka said militias only fight now to control resources and to secure illegal trade routes to Uganda. Vaweka added that because the GDRC cannot provide jobs or money to the population, joining the militias becomes an attractive option. Bunia's Bishop Monsignor Dieudonne Uringi agreed, saying the militias are further supported by local businessmen with known economic ties in Uganda. These local merchants, Uringi said, often facilitate the illegal transfer of goods across the border and use the proceeds to purchase and smuggle weapons to the militias.

¶9. (C) By extension, Ituri's militias have become the facilitators for illegal trade across the border. Since the GDRC is unable to provide basic needs or regular employment, militia members see their only chances of economic survival coming from illicit commerce. District Commissioner Vaweka said demobilized ex-combatants are often lured back into

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militia ranks by the promise and security of regular pay and food, things they cannot secure for themselves in civilian life because of the dismal state of the economy. MONUC officials in Ituri said this explains why militias have been successful in recruiting members in recent months, particularly from the ranks of ex-combatants.

THE WAY FORWARD: POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

¶10. (C) Resolving Ituri's militia problem requires an approach that addresses the intertwined economic and security dynamics of the DRC and Uganda. Attempts by MONUC, the international community and local officials to convince militias to surrender their arms and re-enter the community have produced limited results, and are hampered by ineffective management and funding of the DRC's demobilization program. The military solution to neutralize militias, in the form of joint MONUC-FARDC operations, has also proven to be less than fully effective in establishing security, particularly as the FARDC itself often contributes to the region's instability. Aside from more focused efforts in these areas, though, there is a need for greater governmental presence and authority in Ituri, along with a robust economic development program. With increased government control and oversight in the border region, the

illegal trade that now exists can be monitored, regulated, taxed, and legitimized, thereby improving economic conditions on both sides of the border, and reducing the incentive for militias to continue their fight.

¶11. (C) The region's economic infrastructure must be rebuilt. This should include the creation of substantive job-training and job-creation programs, including for ex-combatants. Also important is economic integration with Uganda. The aim should be to benefit both countries through legitimizing and regulating regional economic trade, with the implementation of border and customs controls and the collection of legitimate revenue.

¶12. (C) In terms of security, steps can be taken in several areas to reduce the militia threat, apart from direct military confrontation. First and foremost, the central government needs to establish authority in Ituri after years of neglect. The GDRC will need to work directly and cooperatively with the newly-elected governor and local representatives to ensure economic development and reconstruction programs are implemented, and the central government needs to share revenues with Ituri District. Border security remains a pressing issue for military, police and customs officials to resolve, as large portions of the DRC-Uganda border are not monitored. Finally widespread illegal arms trafficking needs to be brought under control.

COMMENT: FIXING THE HEART OF THE MATTER

¶13. (C) The solution to the Ituri militia threat is no longer just a matter of neutralizing or disarming combatants. Instead, it requires the creation of legitimate and capable local government authorities that can address the region's underlying economic, political, and security problems and thereby eliminate the incentives for militias to continue their fight. End comment.

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